

# THE MASTER KEY

By John Fleming Wilson

By special arrangement for this paper a photo-drama corresponding to the installments of "The Master Key" may now be seen at the leading moving picture theaters. By arrangement made with the Universal Film Manufacturing company it is not only possible to read "The Master Key" in this paper, but also afterward to see moving pictures of our story.

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## Synopsis of Preceding Chapters

Tom Gallon, owner of the Master Key mine, dies, leaving his property to his daughter, Ruth, in care of John Dorr, the mine engineer, whom Ruth loves. Wilkerson, superintendent of the mine, plots with Jean Darnell, an adventuress with whom he is in love, to deprive Ruth of the mine. Ruth goes to San Francisco to meet George Everett, a wealthy friend of Dorr's, to borrow money on the mining property to pay for further development work. Mrs. Darnell meets her, introduces her to a man whom she falsely represents as Everett, and takes charge of her in San Francisco. Hearing nothing from Ruth, Dorr becomes alarmed and goes to San Francisco, whither Wilkerson has preceded him. Meanwhile Ruth, in a hotel, hears Mrs. Darnell and Wilkerson plotting against her. She calls for help, but is hurried out of the hotel by her captors, who conceal her in the home of a Chinese acquaintance of Wilkerson's. Dorr begins the search for Ruth with the aid of a detective. They trail her to Sing Wah's house, which they enter by force. Sing Wah forces Ruth to flee with him, but Dorr takes up the pursuit and rescues Ruth. Henry Pell, an ex-convict, is called in by Wilkerson as an accomplice to steal the papers from Ruth's room at the Manx hotel. Dorr detects him and pursues him up the fire escape to the roof. A desperate struggle follows and Pell is thrown off and killed. Unknown to Dorr he had thrown the papers into an alley. Tom Kane arrives just in time to take part in the pursuit of Henry Pell. John Dorr was taken to jail for the death of Pell, but Everett soon secured his release. The deeds thrown into an alley by Pell were found by a street cleaner who advertised them and Wilkerson secured them at last. Wilkerson attempted to kidnap Ruth but was hampered by Tom Kane. Wilkerson and Jean Darnell then left the city for Los Angeles. A physician ordered Ruth to a quiet place to restore her shattered nerves and Dorr, Everett, Ruth and Tom Kane all left for Los Angeles on the train with the others, who were disguised and in a different coach. Wilkerson forges transfers of the deeds and sends Drake to the mines. Everett lends John \$5,000 and sends Kane to reopen the mines. Troubles multiply and all hurry to the mines. Wilkerson hires a Mexican bandit gang to rob Kane. A terrific personal combat takes place between Dorr and Wilkerson, in which Wilkerson is apparently killed.

after thoughtfully considering the matter. "We can get back into Mexico in twenty-four hours from here. So long as you pay us and let us—what do you call it—loot, my men are with you."

Wilkerson covertly studied the desperado's impassive visage. Jose Vinas bore a renowned name on the border for daring, shrewdness and wickedness. He was known as "The Merciless." For five years he had had a price set on his head, yet because of the loyalty of his adherents and his own fearlessness he had escaped.

No man better fitted for a sinister purpose could have been found. Yet mingled with Wilkerson's satisfaction at having such a tool to his hand was a dread of the man himself, and his calm insistence on the privilege of looting the camp when it was captured gave him a sense of nausea.

After all, they were Americans down there in the "Master Key" camp. Through his binoculars he could see Ruth on the porch of the bungalow. Vinas, too, saw her. He took no pains to conceal the cruel interest in his eyes.

The next few days resulted in little advantage to either side. John Dorr could not reopen the mine nor even send in for much needed supplies because of the constant menace of the outlaws, who occasionally fired scattering shots down into the gulch as a warning that they were vigilant.

On the other hand, Wilkerson found it impossible to seize the camp without precipitating a battle, from which he shrank. Deeply involved as he already was in crime, he dreaded to cross the border line which would forever place him beyond the pale and make him an outlaw.

Instead, he used every method to put himself outwardly in the right. He sent plea after plea to the sheriff of the county to come and restore order, asserting that he had been driven from his rightful property by violence and that the situation was such that, with-



Ruth on the Porch of the Bungalow.

inured. "That's your lookout, not mine. All I'm asking for is protection."

The sheriff departed without giving him any satisfaction, and Wilkerson determined that he would act. The



"Ruth oughtn't to be here."

Mexicans were getting restless, and the sardonic Vinas hinted sharply that he was impatient.

"All right," Wilkerson agreed. "We'll just go down to the road in the morning and then walk into the camp. Leave it to me. I'll simply say I've come back to take charge and you are my miners."

Vinas twined his wiry mustaches. "And then?"

The men looked each other in the eye. That evil glance was sufficient.

John Dorr and Tom Kane, meanwhile, had been in constant consultation. One thing was constantly in their thoughts.

"Ruth oughtn't to be here," John would say dismally. "If it weren't for her we could quickly settle these outlaws, for that's all they are."

"I reckon nobody would cry at the inquest," the cook returned. "If we did get a few of them. But, as you say, the girl is here, and that puts fighting out of the question. Unless they start it," he added cautiously.

"Wilkerson is bound to make some kind of a move mighty soon," said Dorr. "He can't satisfy those fellows of his for long."

Yet when Wilkerson appeared at the entrance to the camp one morning with a motley train of followers Dorr was at a loss to know what to do. Wilkerson was apparently peaceful and expected a peaceful reception. His boldness had almost carried him through when the ignorance and cupidity of one of Vinas' men gave John and Kane the sorely wished for opening.

The Mexican peered into the window of one of the cabins and saw a gold watch on the table. Instantly he broke the glass with the butt of his carbine and reached in for his booty.

Dorr and Kane had warned the miners at the first appearance of Wilkerson that there might be trouble brewing, but that the first blow must come from the other side.

"Boys," said the old cook, "you know the sheriff. He's listened to both sides, and he don't rightly know which is the one to take. But one thing is certain—he's got to keep order and protect human life and our property. If those fellows make a wrong move we've got the sheriff on our side. See?"

They had seen the point, with many mutterings. They had quietly prepared themselves for just the occasion which the Mexican's act now gave. As the bandit pulled his arm back with the watch in his hand a revolver cracked, and the arm fell shattered to his side. And as Wilkerson glanced furiously about him he saw the camp ready. He cursed the maddened Mexican and grasped Vinas by the arm.

"Stop your men!" he implored. "Don't let them fire a shot or we are lost!"

It was too late. Passionous long restrained now broke out, and within a minute a battle was raging between the walls of the gulch.

The miners had the advantage. They fought from the shelter of their own cabins, and they were united by a common purpose. Their attackers were scattered, were divided between lust for loot and thirst for blood and had no sure refuge nor rendezvous. Yet they would eventually have made the camp untenable had not the thoughtful sheriff prepared a surprise for both parties.

After consultation with his advisers in the county seat he had appealed to the governor on the ground that as one of the opposing forces was Mexican

he felt that a superior authority should handle so delicate a situation. The governor had agreed and ordered a troop of cavalry to the "Master Key" to preserve order. It was just when Wilkerson had seen his chance for a grand coup that the troopers arrived.

Ruth, with some of the women, had taken refuge in John's house on the hill, with old Tom Kane as their bodyguard. Wilkerson knew that if he could capture Ruth he could make his own terms. He directed several of his men to make a detour around the hill and effect this. Meanwhile he set fire to a cabin below in order to distract the attention of Dorr and his men.

The ruse had nearly succeeded but for Kane's quickness. Though he had not used his gun for many years, he had lost none of his old time skill, and when the marauders made their final

dash on the porch of the house the cook, with a single glance over his shoulder, shot from the hip. His man tumbled dead at Ruth's feet, and his companions sneaked back.

At that instant the cavalry rushed in, and before five minutes were passed their commander had separated the combatants and proceeded to disarm them.

He then called Dorr and Wilkerson to him and curtly stated that his orders were to see that there was no trouble. "What your quarrel is I don't know," he said.

Wilkerson tried to argue, but neither the officer nor the sheriff, who now arrived, would listen to him. They also turned a deaf ear to John Dorr's statement of Wilkerson's crimes, including the kidnapping of Ruth in San Francisco.

"If you have anything against Wilkerson," the sheriff asserted, "swear out a warrant for him. I'll serve it quick enough."

With this John must perforce be satisfied, but after a conference with Kane it was agreed that the latter should go to the county seat and make formal complaint and procure a warrant for Wilkerson's arrest on the ground of forgery.

"You and I know those deeds he flourishes aren't genuine," John said earnestly. "Let's make it an issue and try it in court. At any rate, we'll be rid of him for awhile."

"I know you're right," the old cook assented heartily. "I'll be off today. With these troopers around the greasers won't dare do anything openly. But keep your eyes open, John! They will sneak something across if they can."

"Trust me for that," was the reassuring response.

But when Kane had gone Dorr realized that he was in a nasty predicament. Wilkerson was desperately play-



The Cook Shot From the Hip.

ing so bold a game that it would take every resource at his disposal to meet him successfully. Ruth must be protected in her rights. The "Master Key" mine must remain in her possession undisturbed. That would be impossible until Wilkerson was eliminated. And that man was after great stakes; otherwise he would never have ventured so far.

As he debated this inwardly John went over in memory all the events of the brief period since old Thomas Gallon had died, leaving his daughter in his charge. Before his mind's eye ran the pictures of the last scenes and then—

Like a flash it came to him! What was in that letter the old man had so carefully cherished and handed him at the last? Had Gallon foreseen something like this and prepared for it? In his last days had his failing powers concentrated on his single aim and evolved a final safeguard for the "Master Key?"

With the sealed letter in his hand John Dorr stared at the superscription: Not to be opened until my daughter's eighteenth birthday or before then if her welfare is threatened.

Quickly he tore the envelope open. The inclosure fell out in two portions. He put them together, with a muttered ejaculation at his own carelessness and read the crabbied script:

Silent Valley, Cal., June 20.  
Little Girl—Read carefully what I write. On this depends your future welfare.

The "Master Key" mine discovered by me five years ago contained a mother lode of inestimable worth. The exact location of the lode is written on a slip of paper, which I placed in the head of an Indian idol in an old sea chest, which went down with the ship on which I was wrecked.

On the master key, the key to that chest, and which you wear on your neck, is carved the location where the vessel went down. Find that slip of paper and the wealth is yours. Your devoted father, THOMAS GALLON.

## CHAPTER XX.

The Rival Wrecking Crews.  
FOR some moments Dorr stared at this message from the dead. True, it was addressed to Ruth, but its message was to him, John Dorr. Now, he knew something of the tremendous stake for which Wilkerson was playing. So deep in thought was he that

he did not notice that he was being spied upon. He must see Ruth and tell her. He slipped the letter into his pocket, not observing that the torn portion dropped to the table.

As he hurried out, fat with his news, a Mexican stole into the room and, after a keen glance around, picked up the bit of paper. He had seen the triumphant expression on Dorr's face. That writing must be valuable. He tried to decipher it, but failed. So he thrust it into his shirt and stole away.

Half an hour later the last few lines of that letter were in Harry Wilkerson's hands.

It was not until he had explained to Ruth the circumstances under which he had opened the letter and handed her the inclosure that John discovered that the last portion was missing, the part that told of the figures on the key. Together they sought it in vain.

"Well," said Ruth cheerfully, "at least I have the key and now we know what those figures stand for."

"Yes," he assented, "the latitude and longitude where the wreck sank. But I don't like the disappearance of that last part. It was rank carelessness of me. What if it should fall into Wilkerson's hands?"

Ruth laughed, dangling the key by its ribbon. "We have the master key!"

"Yes," John replied more cheerfully. "He won't know where the place is, anyway. But we must arrange to find that wreck and get the chest."

"But if the ship sank?" she said. "Lots of people will remember the wreck," was the response. "And with this accurate position of where it went down a diver will be able to recover what we want."

They discussed this for some time and decided that as soon as Kane returned with the warrant for Wilkerson they would start out for San Pedro and proceed to locate the sunken vessel and find if possible the chest and its precious contents.

"With Wilkerson safely in the sheriff's hands and Kane on the job here all will be safe," John said finally.

But Wilkerson, with the torn scrap of paper in his hand, was planning swiftly and certainly. With Vinas he laid a scheme for that night. When the details were settled the bandit smiled crookedly. "I'll get the key myself," he remarked. "It will be a pleasure."

"No roughness," warned Wilkerson. "With a lady?" demanded Vinas silkily. "Never!"

"All right," was the response. "But remember these troopers aren't overly fond of you."

The Mexican made his preparations to get the key that held the secret of the treasure with peculiar care. One would have thought he was going to a ball, so fanciful his dress, so careful his whole get-up. When he had completed his arrangements he presented a striking and gaudy figure, with silver banded sombrero, heavy studded belt, embroidered shirt and flowing scarf.

Wilkerson contemplated him moodily. "You'd better wear a jumper and overalls," he snarled. "Any one can spot you a mile in that dandified dress."

Vinas kissed a dirty hand to the stars. "In honor of the lady," he said, with bravado. "Never shall it be said that Jose Vinas was ignorant of the niceties of demeanor, senor."

Finding his protests useless, Wilkerson subsided. Vinas departed, apparently for a stroll through the silent camp. He even stopped for a chat with a watchful trooper, who readily believed his casual statement that he was going on a lover's expedition.

It was just midnight when Vinas stood over the bed on which Ruth lay asleep. For a long moment he stood there in his gaudy finery watching her. He seemed almost on the point of waking her in order to satisfy his overweening vanity. But the clank of a bride chain outside warned him that he stood in great peril. With swift fingers he touched the ribbon, bent over and gently drew out the key. He cut the ribbon with one slip of his knife and looked at his booty. But the girl's immovable and lovely face drew his eyes again to her. With a sweep of his arm he lifted his heavy hat to her and passed out, silent as a cat of his native mountains.

With the key in his possession Wilkerson became suddenly his own nervous self. He must get away instantly, he knew. Kane would be back in the morning with a warrant. Already he was being watched by the suspicious troopers. He must escape this very night.

After a short conversation with Vinas and the appointment of a future rendezvous, Harry Wilkerson armed himself and started lazily down into the camp to see what was moving. Nothing stirred. He returned to the hill camp and thence swiftly and quietly made his way upward, taking advantage of every bush and rock that might afford him screen.

He was almost to the top when a sentry challenged him and stepped forward.

"I'm merely goin' out a little ways for a walk," Wilkerson explained.

"Not allowed after nightfall," was the response.

Without further parley, Wilkerson leaped forward, grasped the man's rifle and tripped him. A moment later he was footing it up to the crest at top speed, with the sentry's cries for help urging him on.

Before he could reach the divide a bullet whizzed by his head, then another. He turned madly and fired rapidly down into the shadows at his pursuers. He cursed himself for his folly when a second sentry appeared above him, drawn by the flash of his shots to his hiding place. There was but one refuge, the mine—

plunged obliquely downward for it. Naturally enough, the troopers thought their quarry was cornered, but Wilkerson drove straight on downward to an old working, mounted again, crossed by a disused gallery and finally emerged far up the cliff. On his way he had picked up a coil of rope, and when he found himself on the edge of the precipice and his pursuers gaining on him he made one end of the rope fast and speedily started to descend. But the distance was too great. Before he was halfway to the bottom he had been discovered, and he felt the rope being hauled up. In despair, with a madman's strength, he swung far out and then in, dropping on a little ledge concealed by the overhang of the cliff.

As the rope came free in their hands the pursuers realized that their prey had escaped them. They peered over. Surely he had fooled the law only to meet death on the rocks far below.

On his giddy perch Wilkerson heard their awed speculations and laughed silently. Then he crawled away. In the distance he heard the screech of a locomotive whistle, marking the passage of an express. The freight would be due in two hours. He must make it.

Tom Kane arrived early in the morning to find the camp in an uproar. The Mexicans had quietly vanished, Ruth was mourning the loss of the master key, and the sheriff, staring at the now useless warrant, was beyond words to express his chagrin.

John Dorr alone was serene, though he realized that Wilkerson had again checkmated him. But the immediate need of the hour was haste. He instructed Kane to take charge of the mine and directed Ruth to prepare for a trip to the coast that afternoon.

"Luckily I copied those figures," he said grimly.

Two days later John Dorr and Ruth were steaming up the channel from San Pedro in a launch fitted with diving outfit. The skipper of the launch remembered perfectly the burning of the steamer and, now that he knew the position where it sank, gave out great hopes of finding the bulk.

"The sea is shallow there, and the tides aren't strong enough to move her," he stated. "The only thing is, somebody may have been ahead of us."

"Wilkerson couldn't be ahead of us," John assured Ruth. "I inquired carefully at San Pedro."

Yet at noon his unspoken fears were realized. There was another powerful launch ahead of them which their captain identified as a diving and salvage boat from San Diego.

"Then they'll get ahead of us!" Ruth mourned. "After all our trouble!"

The launch captain and the diver both comforted her by stating that the given position was not far away, that it was sometimes a matter of days to find a wreck even if the approximate location was known and that at any rate they would soon be near enough to see whether the other craft was successful.

Two hours later Wilkerson's launch was swinging easily over the low



Her Eyes Filled With a Mingling of Triumph and Hatred.

swells not a mile from the bluff shore, and they could see his diver preparing to go down.

"I hope he doesn't find it!" breathed Dorr as he urged his own men to greater speed.

"They've struck the spot if those figures of yours are correct," was the reply. "But time will tell."

When the two boats were close together John saw that Mrs. Darnell was with Wilkerson. He could see the bronze tint of her eyes, her eyes filled with a mingling of triumph and hatred. And that look grew brighter and more malicious when the diver, coming up from his first descent, showed a large bit of wood, evidently from a wreck. Though they could not hear the words, those on Dorr's boat could understand the directions that were being given.

"Get over and send your man down, quick!" commanded Dorr.

The captain and the diver glanced at each other doubtfully; then the former shook his head.

"No," he said gruffly. "They found it, and it's theirs by sea law. Anyway I ain't going to send my man down when there's danger, as there always is with two men working under water at cross purposes."

"But they'll get the chest!" cried Ruth.

"Wait and see," said the imperturbable diver.

Half an hour later John turned to Ruth and said miserably: "Well, they have got it. That ends this excursion."

(Continued on Fourth Page)